

Fancy meeting you here! Aegeus and Medea in Euripides' *Medea*

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In one of the central scenes of Euripides' *Medea*, the Colchian princess, consumed with anger and jealousy at Jason's betrayal of her, rather strangely bumps into an old chum. King Aegeus of Athens has been visiting the Delphic oracle for advice on his childlessness, and stops off in Corinth on his way back. Medea is quick to sweet-talk him into promising her sanctuary after she has left the city, promising him help with his fertility problems; though when he promises, of course, he is unaware of the small matter that she plans to kill her children with Jason, as well as his new bride. Aristotle was an early critic of this scene, proclaiming it 'illogical' (in his *Poetics*). Many subsequent commentators have agreed that the entry of Aegeus in the *Medea* is just a little too convenient to be believable. Is the scene really beyond any logic? Have we caught Euripides napping?

Troizen and the art of mythical maintenance

The first question must be: what is Aegeus doing in Corinth? He is (he says) returning from Delphi to Athens via Troizen, where he intends to ask the advice of King Pittheus about the oracle's reply. An ancient scholar, commenting on this passage, pointed out that the obvious way to travel from Delphi to Troizen is indeed to take ship across the Corinthian gulf to the great port of Corinth, to cross the Isthmus and then sail southwards, avoiding the perilous land trek. Although Euripides does not say as much, considerations of geography and convenience make for a plausible explanation for a quick visit to Corinth.

There are, indeed, other reasons for Aegeus' detour on the way home to Athens, reasons of a different kind. As Athenian audiences would have been acutely aware, the established version of the Aegeus myth would not 'work' if he did not visit Troizen. At Troizen, King Pittheus (we learn from other sources) tricked him into sleeping with his own daughter Aithra. The result of this encounter was Theseus, the greatest king of Athens.

So Aegeus has to go to Troizen, or the Athenians would have to forego their most important mythical hero. But is there a mythical reason why he has to go via Corinth? Well, not specifically; but it is certainly vital that Aegeus at some point meet Medea. Everyone in the audience would have known that Medea was destined to take refuge in Athens with Aegeus, whose third wife she became. Euripides himself wrote a play about this called *Aegeus* (quite possibly before he wrote *Medea*), and so did Sophocles.

These plays told a story that was as culturally important as it was exciting. Theseus, having fought his way up to Athens from Troizen by land, swatting bandits like flies on the way, presented himself at his father's palace. Medea persuaded the aged and timorous Aegeus that the young man was dangerous and convinced him to give him poison. Just as Theseus raised the cup to drink, however, Aegeus recognised the tokens he had left behind for Aithra's child in Troizen and dashed the cup from his son's lips. Medea fled with her son by Aegeus, who in some versions was called Medus and was the ancestor of the near-eastern people the Greeks called the 'Medes' (who were later unified with the Persians).

On the road

Much hangs, then, on the Aegeus episode in the *Medea*. Indeed, much of the scene's importance lies in this connection with Athens and Theseus, which also constitutes a strong counter-argument to Aristotle's charge of unnecessary illogicality. Yet once we acknowledge this mythical background, we perceive some powerful effects. Euripides is not just using this scene mechanically, because he wants to make the myths work; he also uses the audience's awareness of the mythic background to the Aegeus story to enrich their reading of the play as a whole.

The first point to make is that it is very much NOT in Aegeus' interests to help Medea and allow her to come to Athens. Her promise to help cure his supposed infertility with drugs is not only unnecessary (since Aegeus will beget Theseus without her help on his way home), but also conjures up a sinister picture of other uses to which she can put drugs. Not only does she murder Jason's new bride Glauce with poison later in this play, but also she was held to have threatened Theseus later in the myth.

Secondly, we are invited to look forward to the baneful influence Medea will exercise over Aegeus once she has arrived in Athens. At this stage, he is a respectable and sympathetic figure, honourable and hospitable. In the later part of the story, however, he is far from admirable, plotting to poison a guest at Medea's behest, until he discovers who he is. It may well be that the overwhelming reaction of the audience during this scene was alarm that Aegeus appears so unsuspecting in his dealings with Medea and takes the fatal oath so willingly and innocently. Hence, perhaps, the chorus' elaborate farewell, which (unusually for tragedy) is composed in lyric metre. The chorus call on Hermes to escort Aegeus home, an elaborate way of wishing him luck; he's going to need it. It is also against this background that we need to read the chorus' famous ode in praise of Athens, sung immediately after Medea has declared her intention to kill the children. Medea will not only be the murderess of her own children, but will also try to murder Aegeus' splendid child Theseus, Athens' greatest king. The Athenian audience's awareness of this fact would surely undercut any pride they might feel in the chorus' blithe celebrations of their city.

So, despite what Aristotle says, Euripides *does* have a creative use for this 'illogical' episode. The fact of Aegeus arriving in Corinth is not only essential to allow Medea to carry out her plan, it is also used to create a lot of tension and to make us look beyond the immediate context of the play to what Medea – and Aegeus – will become. The encounter has other dramatic benefits as well. In particular, it complements Medea's earlier supplication of King Creon of Corinth, which is only partially successful: she begs him to be released from exile, and when that fails she successfully gains a (crucial) day's grace. The limited success of that earlier supplication contrasts with her total success here, and so gives the play a sense of direction. As Medea's plans take shape, she gradually gains more power over others.

Catch her in the eye

But there is one aspect of the scene that I do find puzzling. Why does Aegeus greet Medea like an old friend? Where have they met before? Is this to be explained as a slightly clumsy attempt

by Euripides to minimise the coincidence? But if that is what he was trying to do, it seems unsuccessful, more artificial than if the scene opened with a dialogue in which Aegeus simply introduced himself. Perhaps the audience is simply not meant to pause to think of any kind of story to explain the warmth of feeling between them. Alternatively, perhaps Euripides and his audience would have just assumed that this heroic mythological world is a small one, in which the elite of different cities tend to know each (as seems the case in Homer).

Perhaps, though, it is worth mentioning a suggestion made by a nineteenth-century scholar, who thought the warmth of Aegeus' and Medea's greeting so striking that he concluded that Euripides must have been drawing on a version of the myth which made Aegeus one of the Argonauts. This would be very interesting if it could be shown to be true: if we are meant to think that, then the familiarity with the Colchian princess has an obvious cause, then Aegeus' whole arrival fits better with the preceeding scene, where Medea calls on the Argonauts as witnesses of all she has done for Jason. Aegeus would have good reason to know what Jason owes Medea and his indignation on her behalf becomes very understandable (though, as he also presumably would know about her murder of her own brother to gain time to escape, he would still be alarmingly incautious in his sympathies for her).

The only difficulty with this lovely theory is that there is no evidence whatever that anyone ever made Aegeus an Argonaut. There are certainly a number of different lists of the Argonauts – it's a sort of ancient version of fantasy football – but although both Theseus and his sons Akamas and Demophon sometimes feature, no surviving list features Aegeus. It would not be impossible for him to have made it onto such a list, because the most popular selections do feature characters from up to two generations before the Trojan War, which would include him, but unfortunately, as far as we know, he did not. There were other Argonaut lists in Athenian dramas now lost; but unless they are found, and found to have featured Aegeus, this beautiful theory must, regretfully, be abandoned.

Despite this puzzling oddity, the Aegeus scene makes a vital contribution to the play. Not only does it tie this narrative set in Corinth directly to Athens, the city in which the drama was composed and performed, but also it allows readers aware of the larger mythical background to read the play's subtle literary nuances. Aristotle could not have been more wrong.

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